Conflict of interest: 
A practical guide for researchers

What is a conflict of interest

A conflict of interest exists where there is a real, perceived, or potential divergence between the individual interests of a person and their professional responsibilities, where that divergence suggests a level of undue bias or lack of objectivity. Disclosure and, where necessary, management of conflicts of interest is crucial to maintaining the transparency and trustworthiness of research undertaken at the University.

Conflicts of interest are often thought of in financial terms, but can take almost any form, including familial, scholarly, and professional conflicts.

Conflict of interest in a research setting

In a research setting, conflicts may affect your professional judgment in conducting, evaluating, or reporting on research. It may affect, or be seen to affect, not only the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data, but also the hiring of staff, procurement of materials, sharing of results, choice of protocol, involvement of human subjects, and the use of statistical methods. In short, a conflict of interest can affect almost anything you do as a researcher, and it is important to be creative when considering how your research might be improperly influenced by your situation.

As a general guide, use the ‘trust test’ – would others (e.g. employer, clients, colleagues, or the general public) trust my judgment if they knew I was in this situation? You can also use our checklist for identifying whether or not you have a COI, available on our website.

I might have a conflict of interest, what do I do?

It’s normal to have a conflict of interest! It’s how you manage it that counts. The first principle of conflict of interest management is to disclose that conflict to others. To do this at the University of Melbourne, you should usually complete a conflict of interest disclosure form in conjunction with your Head of Department. If your Head of Department agrees that you likely have a conflict of interest, he or she will work with you to create a conflict of interest management plan.

Why disclose?

Failing to disclose a conflict of interest harms the trustworthiness of your research. In some circumstances, failing to disclose can put you at risk of disciplinary or legal proceedings. It is not enough to manage a conflict yourself, if you feel that you have a conflict of interest, you must disclose it in accordance with University policy.

Resources

You can access our conflict of interest disclosure form, our conflict of interest management strategies, and other information and tools on the OREI website.

The Office for Research Ethics and Integrity
Level 3, 780 Elizabeth St, Melbourne 3000, Australia
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